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**A Transgender's Struggle for Identity and Survival through Education in A Gift of Goddess  
Lakshmi by Manobi Bandyopadhyay with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey.**

A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi is a candid biography of India's first transgender principal, written by Manobi Bandyopadhyay with Jhimli Mukherjee Pandey. The book with its autobiographical tone pictures Manobi Bandyopadhyay's search for self-identity through education. She became India's first transgender principal at Krishnagar Women's college in West Bengal on 9 June 2015. 'Education: If we learn all our problems will be solved' is her message to her community. The book is about a transgender who fights against the traditional view of considering transgender as a strange, detestable creature, perhaps a criminal and definitely subhuman. Though born as a transgender, Manobi realizes herself as a women trapped in man's body. Amidst all humiliation, Manobi tries hard to accept her as she was. She rewrote her destiny through self-acceptance and social acceptance gained with the power of education.

Through this work Manobi tries reaffirm the legal and human rights of transgenders. The transgenders have the right to emotions, feelings and recognition. She urges the transgenders not to blame the society, but to blame themselves for not being able to ignore the pain inflicted up on them by the society. The work helps as to have a better understanding

of the lives of the transgenders and the possible changes that can be brought about by education.

Somnath, (Manobi- name after sex change operation) the narrator of the story belongs to a traditional Bengali joint family. His father Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay was an educated man. Somnath was the third 'son' born to his father. The birth of a son was a matter of proud for Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay and he named the child, Somnath, as he thought of the child was Shiva's gift to him. As Chittaranjan found a job in a very prestigious engineering company after the birth of the son, the boy had proved to be lucky. All said, 'Chitta, this is a boy Lakshmi'. This pure coincidence, later became a quite a meaningful one.

All the things changed when the boy started to express some kind of feminine nature. The metamorphosis started with his love for his sister's printed frocks. He made use of every opportunity to slip in to them. First he did this in the privacy of his room, and then roamed about in the whole house. Initially everyone thought of it as a childish joke. But when he started to makeup himself using his mother's makeup kit, his own family members realized that it was an aberration. His parents thought that this problem would be solved by the interaction with other students.

At the age of six he was sent to Mahendra High School in Naihati. On the first day itself, he had to face humiliation from the classroom. His mother had tied a scarf around his head to protect him from the cold. But the big sized boys in the class called him a girl because he had a veil on his head and they made him sit with the girls. All the girls laughed but Somnath enjoyed it very well and did not mind it at all! Here begins his fight for self-acceptance and survival. He never blamed other children because he always wanted to be called as a girl. He just wept but never complained about the harassment he had to face. By this time, he realized that he had a powerful physical attraction towards men. One of his cousins made use of him for his perversions. In class sixth and seventh, he was an apple for

every boy's eye. He enjoyed being the center of attraction. The boys tried to abuse him, but the girls played the role of protectors. It didn't hurt him because in one or another way it was the acceptance of his femininity. Meanwhile his family had to face a lot of troubles for his abnormalities. The whole family members and neighbors blamed his parents for not being able to control the aberration in the behavior of the boy. His father took out his frustration on his mother and older sisters for not controlling his behaviour.

"The only silver lining was the fact that I was extremely good in studies. I was always top in my class and that kept some mouths shut. In fact, when my parents would be accosted for not being straight enough to 'bring me back' they would proudly show off my mark and say that a boy who was such a genius was bound to be a little 'different.' They knew this was no excuse but they had no other way of dealing with this somehow. I did not let my awaking sexuality affect my intellect; I would work hard to stay at the top my class. I realized that this way was the only way by which I could win this unequal fight" (Manobi, 10-11)

Somnath found education as the essential tool to fight against the gender caste system which debarred him from being a normal human being. So he continued to work hard in studies in the High School level itself. It's evident that even his parents used the shield of education to cover up the shame invited by the abnormal behavior of their child. Somnath wanted to create his own space through education.

Somnath was also inclined towards Bengali movies and literature. He could copy exactly the important actresses of the movies. He was ever ready to imitate them, when the other boys requested him to do so. All these were part of establishing himself as a 'herself' and he even was a born dancer and created steps on his own. His enthusiasm for dance helped him to play a role in a cultural show as a farmer's wife and dance to Tagore's famous song, 'listen to the cold of winter...' He once said "Being a boy, if Somnath can pick up girl's steps so well, why you all can't do that?" He enjoyed the adulation and yearned to tell all that he

was not trying to be a girl, he was actually one! Later he joined many dance troupes and found many men who are physically men, but are feminine souls.

During his school days he fell in love with many boys. All of them, hurted his love at the end. "I was not looking for physical gratification at all, but for a relationship that would eventually lead to a future, a family" (manobi 25). He always wanted to have a happy family life with a loving and protective husband. He wanted that lover, who could express his love for his beloved without crude exhibitionism.

He passed his exams with flying colors and the all the family celebrated the happy moments. His father became extremely happy and showed off his 'son's' great achievement to his brothers and their wife. But he decided that his son should study science at the senior secondary level, which saddened Somnath as he liked literature. Anyway, he had to took up Science. This time too, he had many relationships which ended in desperation as usual. As a Hijra, he was in search of a relationship driven by the heart, not by the body.

Again the questions of identity began to haunt him "I was very confused; my life seemed like a never-ending maze - each time I arrived at the same bend. Who was I? Why was my body different from my soul or was I mistaking my identity? Why was I born this way? Was it some past karma for which I was being made to pay so dearly? What could I do to escape this trap?" (Manobi 31). The existential pain of a transgender soul cannot be pictured more beautiful than this. Many people classified him as a 'girlish' boy was preparation to make him a Hijra. Here too he was known as a good student and his teachers tried their best to ignore his deficiencies and made him to explore new horizon of knowledge as if that was the only way he could find emancipation. He proved his excellence in the exams and he convinced his father his love for Bengali literature.

He joined Rishi Bankim Chandra College for admission in the Bengali department. He expected a relief in the struggle for the identity in a college atmosphere but it did not

happened. The college became yet another place where he had to fight for his identity and respect. Though he had read more Bengali literature than that anyone else, what mattered was his sex, male or female. Many of the boys, seniors and classmates came to rag him but the girls stood by him like solid pillars. At times of frustration he would think of a sex change operation as the only way to get the kind of love he was looking for. Maya Di, one of the better known feminists in Kolkata, sympathized with him. Realizing that he wanted to do something creative she asked him to write an article for her own women's magazine named, Malini. Thus he got a chance to interview the Hollywood actress Shabana Azmi and it received quite a bit off critical acclaim. He became thrilled and decided to go all out and explore the opportunity as a journalist. Some of the editors in charge gave him assignments. Filled with joy he was over the moon." Suddenly, my college mates started treating me with a modicum of respect and this thrilled me no end. From a stage where people treated me like an outcaste to this- I had already walked quite a distance. I knew I had to keep writing well and get more articles published for people to take me seriously. The fact that I could not become a full time journalist in the end is another matter. Academia, my first love took the better of me" (Manobi 46-47). He pictures education as his first love. The broken relationships only provided him with a heavy heart. So he chose education or knowledge as his first love who can provide him with self-respect and self-identity.

His educated friends in the field of Bengali newspapers helped him to have a new confidence. He took bolder steps to come out as a transgender person by changing the style of dressing. His parents became proud of the fact that their son was writing regularly for the newspapers. It elevated their status in the locality. Somnath gained popularity among the girls and boys by setting his goals higher than the rest of the class. After BA exams he cleared the entrance test at Jadavpur University. It was a completely different world with varieties. He realized that he was nothing before the intellectual giants of the university. The progressive

campus never gave attention to his sexual alignment. Quest for excellence was the primary concern of the university. Intellectual exchange with eminent teachers helped him to overcome depressions. He could not score first class marks in M A and enrolled for an MPhil at the same university. He also started working as a research scholar at Pratibha Agarwals Natya Shodh Sansthan, the country's largest repository of archival material on Indian theatre. It was there he developed her intellectual abilities that made him, what he is today.

He got a part time lecture position in Sree Krishna College with a good salary. Through the employment exchange, he finally found a permanent teaching position in a school. Meanwhile he got acquainted with many friends including transgenders. Education helped him to attain both friends and financial independence. In 1995 he became a college lecturer. There too he faced gender troubles. The fellow teachers openly declared war against him. In their opinion no Hijra had the right to become a professor. This gender discrimination was also motivated by the bangal politicians. They even threatened to rape him. But the love and eagerness of his students attracted him. His students were his only relief. He met some brilliant IIT professors who treated him as an equal and respected him. They even offered their home to stay. He could grab these colorful moments only because of his quality education.

He was the first Indian to publish India's first transgenders magazine named 'Abomanob'. It was his protest against the hypocrisy of the society. It received a lot of publicity and many readers. He also began writing in a novel, 'The Elusive Horizon'. It was actually his writings that prompted many transgenders to come out of their shells. He started his research on the lives of transgender people. During this period he had to undergo many difficulties especially regarding his sex changing operation. He was also denied the deserving promotion because of his new identity of a woman and the change of name from Somnath to Manobi.

The change in governance and politics in Bengal created a new era in the life of Manobi. The new Mamatha, everyone's Didi, according to Manobi, reconsidered all the issues dealing with her name and sexual identity and provided the need justice to her. She became a principal on the basis of pure merit in Krishnagar Women's College. She also adopted a son, whom she met after a lecture in a college. All that Manobi today is because of her education and so is her message to her community, "Education: If we learn, all our problems will be solved."



### Reference

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